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Committee for Agriculture, Environment and
Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Revised NI Bovine Tuberculosis Programme:
Department of Agriculture, Environment and
Rural Affairs

14 January 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Declan McAleer (Chairperson)
Mr Philip McGuigan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Clare Bailey
Mrs Rosemary Barton
Mr John Blair
Mr Maurice Bradley
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr William Irwin

Witnesses:

Mr Neal Gartland	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Michael Hatch	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Raymond Kirke	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Seamus Murray	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I welcome, via StarLeaf, Neal Gartland, director of animal health and welfare policy; Michael Hatch, deputy Chief Veterinary Officer; Raymond Kirke from the TB strategy, veterinary epidemiology and wildlife unit; and Seamus Murray from the TB policy implementation branch.

You can hear me OK there, folks, so I invite you to begin your briefing. Members will ask questions afterwards.

Mr Neal Gartland (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you, Chair. I will lead off on that. Good morning, Chair and members.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Good morning.

Mr Gartland: As you mentioned, I am director of animal health and welfare policy. First, I will introduce my colleagues who are here with me online today: Michael Hatch, deputy Chief Veterinary Officer; Raymond Kirke, senior veterinary officer; and Seamus Murray, head of TB policy. Should the IT gremlins come in, Chair, I will come back in by phone and Seamus will continue the statement.

Thank you for the opportunity that has been afforded to my colleagues and me to bring the Committee up to date with the current position on the bovine tuberculosis (bTB) programme and the development

of a new bovine TB eradication strategy for Northern Ireland. Given the importance of the bovine TB programme in Northern Ireland to animal health, farmers and trade and the amount of work that is currently taking place to finalise the new eradication strategy, this update is very timely.

Bovine tuberculosis is an infectious disease of cattle and is one of the most challenging animal-health issues that faces Departments, including ours, across the UK and Ireland. It is caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium bovis*, which can also infect and cause disease in many other mammals, including humans, deer, goats, pigs, cats, dogs and badgers. In cattle, it is mainly a respiratory disease, but clinical signs are rare.

The Northern Ireland bovine TB programme facilitates access to external markets for our export-dependent livestock and livestock production sectors. The programme supports trade worth more than £1.5 billion per year. As part of the programme, DAERA conducts annual herd tests for TB, with more frequent testing of breakdown in at-risk herds. Animals that test positive for bTB are compulsorily slaughtered, with compensation paid at 100% of market value.

A fall in disease levels contributed to a £4 million reduction in compensation costs in 2019-2020 compared with the previous year, lowering the overall government costs of our programme to just over £36 million. We have seen that decline in disease levels since additional disease control measures were introduced in early 2018. The estimated cost for 2020-21 is again £36 million, which includes additional gamma testing costs. There is a cost to farmers for complying with the TB testing programme, particularly for cattle compulsorily removed. That is in addition to the stress that farming families can experience.

While our current position is slightly more encouraging than in 2017 and 2018, recent disease statistics indicate that the decline in bTB incidence has plateaued. It is important to note, though, that the introduction of testing easements during 2020 due to COVID restrictions may have an impact on disease statistics in the coming months.

We accept that the cost of controlling bTB here remains much too high, in the cost to the public purse and the impact that it has on farmers and farm businesses. That cost and the challenge of making substantial progress in reducing the level of bTB here has led to scrutiny of our approach. A Northern Ireland Audit Office report in 2018, while concluding that our programme provided value for money in its importance to the beef and dairy industries, noted that the high level of public expenditure on bTB in Northern Ireland had failed to reduce disease levels in line with the objectives of the programme and compared the programme unfavourably with progress made elsewhere in Europe.

It is clear that we need to do more and to work smarter together, particularly with the farming community — indeed with all key stakeholders — to tackle the disease. On coming into office in January, Minister Poots made clear that reducing bTB levels and implementing an eradication strategy was one of his top priorities, and it remains so. Since then, he has worked closely with the Chief Veterinary Officer and other policy and veterinary officials to urgently progress work on a new eradication strategy for Northern Ireland. I will now update you on that work.

The development of our proposed eradication strategy began in 2014, when the then Agriculture and Rural Development Minister, Michelle O'Neill, established an independent TB strategic partnership group (TBSPG) to advise the Department and to develop a long-term strategy and implementation plan to eradicate bTB from Northern Ireland. The group undertook a significant exercise in identifying best practice elsewhere and engaged extensively with stakeholders, presenting its report to the then AERA Minister, Michelle McIlveen, in December 2016. The report concluded that eradicating bTB would be a long-term objective, estimating that eradication could take up to 40 years and would require all the factors that contributed to the spread and endurance of the costly disease to be addressed.

The TBSPG made over 30 recommendations across a number of thematic areas, including governance, cattle testing, herd health, finance and research. It also made proposals relating to the role played by wildlife in TB spread. In the absence of the devolved Administration, the Department issued its response to the group's recommendations through a public consultation. Over 200 responses were received from key stakeholders, interested parties and the public. The consultation closed in February 2018.

Around that time, in the face of rising disease levels, the Department took action and put into practice some of the group's important recommendations. Those included additional cattle control measures; a more stringent interpretation of the skin test; and providing herd keepers with additional biosecurity

advice on a more formal basis, delivered by testing veterinarians. Disease levels are currently around 15% lower than before those additional measures were introduced.

In May 2018, the Department established the TB eradication partnership (TBEP), which was a further TBSPG report recommendation, to provide independent expert advice on the development and implementation of the new strategy. The partnership's membership was drawn from the farming community and food processing sector, as well as representatives with scientific, veterinary, food processing and environmental backgrounds. One of its key roles is to engage with stakeholders and to represent their views to the Department as we finalise the eradication strategy.

Following consideration of the consultation responses, officials continued to work on preparing a draft strategy for a future Minister. In the absence of a Minister, the departmental board and permanent secretary agreed a way forward on the strategy in August 2019. That involved developing the recommendations across the six thematic areas outlined in the report and included options relating to badger intervention and possible changes to compensation arrangements for an incoming Minister to consider. Since coming into post, the Minister has worked closely with officials to finalise the strategy.

Importantly, officials have also been working at pace on an associated business case required to underpin the final proposals that the Minister may wish to bring forward. I am pleased to advise the Committee that that work is nearing completion, and the Minister will be presenting his proposed way forward in the coming months, once the work outlined is completed.

We are happy to answer any questions that the Committee may have.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): OK. Thank you very much for that, Neal. It was very informative. Thank you also for the written briefing that we received. A couple of members have indicated that they want to ask questions, but I will perhaps kick off.

One of the things that we have noted is that, as a consequence of Brexit, we will lose £15 million over three years from the EU for animal disease eradication. What impact will that have on the Department's ability to grapple and get to grips with the disease and, indeed, on your future strategy for addressing it?

Mr Gartland: Chair, as you may be aware, the European Commission redefined TB as a priority disease within the money that it provides for eradication strategies across Europe in the past number of years. We would have expected about €1.85 million this year, which had to be approved through our programme. As a result of the UK leaving the EU and not applying to third-country programmes, that will be lost money to the Department. However, we hope that that will not impact on the strategic direction of the programme as a whole or on the strategy that we intend to bring forward, because the business case will include a bid for the additional finances that are required for that. The EU Commission has made reductions over the past number of years due to lack of progress on a Northern Ireland or UK programme, and the Department has always covered any measures that were needed for the programme as it is a statutory obligation. At this time, I do not see a massive or major impact on the strategic direction. The strategy will require significant funding. That will be subject to DOF advice, and an initial bid will need to be made for that in due course, once the Minister makes his final decisions on the way forward.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you, Neal. I want to ask about something else. I was on the previous ARD Committee during the test and vaccinate or remove (TVR) project. Other members of that Committee, including Ian Milne, Oliver McMullan and Tom Elliott, and I went on site in County Down to see that in action. My understanding is that a report on that project has been published but that a full analysis has not yet been carried out. Is that the case? If so, why have we not seen the full analysis of that report yet?

Mr Gartland: Thank you, Chair. I will bring Raymond in on that in a second. The report on the TVR project is not one overarching report but a number of reports that came out of the research that was done during the five years of that project. Much of that has been published, and there are initial findings from that that are dependent on the research project being taken forward from that analysis and results. I will bring Raymond in. He is more aware of the technical detail than I am.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Raymond, you are cutting out. We cannot hear you, Raymond.

Mr Gartland: Chair, Michael should be able to come in, if Raymond cannot.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Michael.

Mr Raymond Kirke (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Can you hear me now?

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Is that Raymond? We can, Raymond.

Mr Kirke: Sorry about that. The internet signal here is not great. I think that the question was about what TVR has told us about what we might do as far as controlling TB is concerned.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Yes.

Mr Kirke: Neal said that there will be no single report as such; however, a number of reports have been published and more are under development.

The first point to make is that the TVR project was primarily an ecological project to allow us to develop techniques for capturing badgers humanely and to trial a relatively new blood test to assess them in the field. A number of reports have been produced. They have given us a bit of an insight into, for instance, the proportion of time that cattle spend grazing in fields where there are setts, the likelihood of badgers and cattle coming into direct contact with each other and whether the TVR project affected the way that badgers behaved by making them range further or less than would normally be the case. The project also let us have a look at the genome sequencing — the genetic fingerprint — of the TB isolates that we gathered from that area to see their history and whether they are likely to have arisen locally or from animals moving into the area.

I hope that that was helpful.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you. I will move to other members around the room; I will not hog it all.

Mr Irwin: Thank you for your presentation. I am a farmer, so I am fully aware of the current levels of TB in Northern Ireland. I have had incidence of it in my herd, so I declare an interest. On the levels in the Republic of Ireland and the levels in Northern Ireland, are the two jurisdictions similar? What is the difference between the current levels of TB in both?

Mr Kirke: Do you want me to take that again, Neal?

Mr Gartland: I am happy for you to take it, Raymond. Thank you.

Mr Kirke: Good morning, William. The current level in Northern Ireland is about 8.3%. A couple of years ago, it was nudging up under 10%. It has come down significantly since then, although, because of COVID, testing was suspended last year, and the effect of that has not fully worked through yet, so it is impossible to say at this stage whether we lost any ground as a result. In contrast, the figure in the Irish Republic is 4.3%, which is significantly lower than the figure here. However, the level in the Republic is going in the opposite direction, in that it has risen significantly in the last year or two.

Mr Irwin: Is there any reason why its figure is half what we have?

Mr Kirke: The two schemes are not equivalent. There are a number of differences between the schemes. There are differences in how farmers are compensated, in how TB testing is paid for and in the approach to wildlife intervention. A wildlife intervention programme has been in place in the Irish Republic for several decades. They are now at the stage where they are able to move to a vaccination-only policy in some areas and to suspend or, hopefully, permanently stop culling in those areas. The short answer is that it is hard to say why that is the case, because the schemes are not equivalent. There is certainly a significant difference.

Mr Irwin: I know that they culled some badgers and even deer. It looks as though that has been of benefit to the Republic.

Mr Kirke: That is certainly a significant difference between the two schemes. I would like to emphasise that it is not the only difference, but it certainly is a significant difference.

Mr Gartland: Raymond, I will come in as well. William, as you will be aware, a lot of the recommendations that were made to the Department and that we previously consulted upon address the differences in the schemes. Ireland has made great progress on its TB rates. As Raymond outlined, there is no one particular factor to outline why its rate is a lot lower than ours currently, but you could point to its suite of measures as part and parcel of its programme, including the testing regime, the compensation aspects and the wildlife intervention aspect, as a reason why it has been successful. All those things are under consideration by us at the moment. Depending on the Minister's final views, hopefully, they will be part and parcel of a new TB eradication strategy for Northern Ireland.

Mr Irwin: I am aware that, in mainland UK, lay testers are used to help vets with local testing. Has that been looked at in Northern Ireland? Would it reduce the overall cost of testing?

Mr Gartland: Seamus, do you want to come in there?

Mr Seamus Murray (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Good morning, Committee. On the issue of lay TB testers — Michael and Raymond are probably better placed to talk about our testing programme — our programme is delivered through our private veterinary practitioners, who carry out testing on our behalf under contract, and that has been quite successful year on year. In 2020, 97.3% of herd tests were completed, which shows you the high success rate, despite all the problems that we have had with COVID restrictions. We have not decided to use lay testers at this point, but it may be a consideration.

Mr Kirke: Do you want me to pick up on that, Seamus?

Mr Murray: Yes, Raymond.

Mr Kirke: You are quite right: lay testing is practised in GB. We have piloted it here and, indeed, have trained a number lay testers. It has not been introduced yet, nor has it been ruled out. There are issues with it. One of the major issues is the certification issue. As you know, Northern Ireland relies heavily on exports. Export certification requirements, in some cases, require veterinary certification, and that, in turn, is supported by a veterinary TB test report. There are therefore impediments to introducing it, but, as I understand, it is still under consideration.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): On the back of what William said — again, this is a request for information — you mentioned that, in the North of Ireland, the incidence rate in herds is 8.3%, but I understand that, in animals, it is 0.7%. Do you know off the top of your head what the equivalent figure for animals as opposed to herds is in the South?

Mr Kirke: I do not have that figure to hand, but we could provide it to the Committee.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): OK. Thank you.

Mr Harvey: Thank you, gentlemen. How common are false negatives in relation to the skin test? Would an alternative form of testing reduce the propensity for false negatives?

Mr Gartland: I will bring Raymond in here, too, on that test question and the technical elements.

Mr Kirke: There are limitations with any test. You can have false positives and false negatives. False negatives are much more likely than false positives. The test is a field test; unlike a lot of other diagnostic tests, you inject the substance in to the animal. In effect, the animal tests the substance, and you return several days later to see what the reaction has been. There are significant problems with the sensitivity of the test, significant issues with it. The specificity of the test — in other words, the likelihood of it giving a positive reaction from an animal that does not have TB — is very low. There is sometimes a little bit of confusion because a post-mortem examination is carried out on reactor animals. It is carried out in the abattoir, but it is carried out primarily for public health purposes, not for test confirmation purposes. It is easy to understand why farmers who are told that nothing was observed in the carcass believe that that, in turn, means that the animal was not infected. That is a misunderstanding. We are working on the nomenclature that we use to try to explain those things a little bit better.

The other part of the question related to other test types. There are indeed other test options. There is a gamma interferon test, which we are already using on a voluntary basis. One of the proposals in the new TB strategy is that we make that a compulsory test. The gamma interferon test — without me becoming too technical — looks for a little protein that is produced in response to infection. We find that that test, in parallel with the skin test, works very well. There are also a number of what are called ELISA tests that are either in use or under development. The best immunological advice from the lab at present is that the use of those tests in addition to the gamma test and the skin test would not improve the overall accuracy of the tests. Although we are keeping a watching brief in that regard, we have not found anything as yet that would improve the position.

Finally, there is a test that has been commented on quite a bit in the press called the Actiphage test, which is an entirely different type of test. It claims to be able to detect live bacteria in a number of different substrates, such as milk, blood and animal dung, even at very low levels. However, the trials to date have been very small scale, and the results have been equivocal. Again, we are keeping a watching brief on that, but there is nothing coming out of it yet that indicates that it is something that we should be pursuing.

Mr Harvey: The eradication strategy is good, but, given the problems at the minute, would it not be better to up a wee bit a focused and intense intervention in the short term?

Mr Gartland: It depends on the final views of the Minister and what the Department can deliver within the time period available. As you will be aware, should the Minister decide to go down the route of wildlife intervention, that would, most likely, require secondary legislation. Money would have to be secured as well, and, operationally, dependent on a type of intervention that the Minister may choose to do, staff would need to be trained in preparation for that. There are a lot of factors to take into account in advance of whether we decide to go for an intensive wildlife intervention on that point. It is unknown at the moment, but once the Minister makes a policy decision, we will start to plan forward on that basis. More consultation will also be required before we look at that issue further.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Are you there, John? He is away. Rosemary?

Mr Blair: I can hear you now.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Go ahead, John. I am sorry, Rosemary.

Mr Blair: Some of the issues, including the loss of the EU funding, have been covered already. On the wildlife issue, is there ongoing engagement between departmental officials and those who work in the wildlife sector? Are they included in any consultations on the new policy?

Mr Gartland: Thank you very much for the question, John. There was very good engagement with the wildlife sector over the previous consultation, and we met them, including when I was in a different role in the TB team, at that time. There is ongoing informal engagement, as and when required, and, as far as I am aware — Seamus can correct me on this — TBEP, in its role as the independent advisory body to the Department, has met a number of our key stakeholders.

It is quite clear that, if the Minister makes a decision on the policy proposal that we have put to him, we will require a consultation on any particular wildlife intervention that is chosen. From that, there will be an extensive stakeholder campaign whereby the Department and officials will engage with our key contacts in the organisations. There will be a full consultation and full engagement on the proposal once it is decided.

Mrs Barton: Thank you for the presentation. My question is about the potential movement of young calves on a farm, especially a dairy farm, where there are, perhaps, 300 or 400 dairy cows and some of them come down as reactors. You cannot move any animals off the farm. The calves are born, which adds an extra burden on the farm and, perhaps, if you look closely at it, it adds a welfare issue, with all the extra calves on the farm that cannot be removed or sold off. Generally, dairy farmers sell off their calves within a few weeks.

There is a very small incidence of TB in calves under six weeks. I understand that there were about 11 cases out of 44,000 last year. Is there potential here for those dairy farmers who have a reactor to, perhaps, sell off their calves either online or to another farmer?

Mr Gartland: Thank you very much, Rosemary. I will bring in Michael or Raymond, who are programme managers, on that one.

Mr Kirke: Do you want me to take that again, Michael?

Mr Michael Hatch (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I am happy to go ahead. The rules are fairly strict for the entire herd whenever there is a breakdown. All animals in the herd are restricted, including calves. The reason why calves tend not to be infected or to test positive is that they are young and TB is a very slow-moving disease. Very often, it is the older animals and the cows that are infected. Nevertheless, they are vulnerable to TB as they grow older, and the legal framework that we work under requires the entire herd to be restricted. There is little or no leeway for movement of animals to other herds because it poses a risk to other herds. That is why the statutory position is so clear here. I hope that that answers your question.

Mrs Barton: Yes, it does answer my question, but could some thought be given to that? Those calves are not susceptible to TB at such a young age, and it would, perhaps, be another way of supporting the farmer. He already cannot get rid of cattle, so at least he could get rid of his young calves. Are there no grounds for looking at that?

Mr Kirke: I will come in on that. The existing scheme has provisions for calves to be moved off infected herds under exceptional circumstances. Indeed, one of the exceptional circumstances is where there is an animal welfare problem that cannot be solved in any other way. It requires agreement from the purchaser to take the animals on to their farm. As Michael pointed out, calves are susceptible to the disease and, unfortunately, we have outbreaks where calves are found to be heavily infected when examined at a post-mortem. However, it is fair to say that the incidence of the disease is higher in older animals. There is that provision in exceptional circumstances, and local offices are well aware of it. They fully appreciate the animal welfare and human welfare issues. It is stressful for farmers to manage a herd with an accommodation that is not suitable for it.

Several years ago, there was another proposal from the Department to set up alternative control herd arrangements, whereby herds would be licensed to accept animals in from reactor herds. There has been no uptake of that as yet. The rules are pretty stringent. Obviously, the purpose of those rules is to protect the neighbours of potential alternative control herds. We are still looking at and working through how we might make that scheme more practicable for farmers who are interested in taking it up. To recap: there are arrangements in place when exceptional circumstances apply.

Mr Murray: One of the proposals in the eradication strategy in development is for industry, TBEP and departmental officials to review and consider the current criteria around alternative control herds (ACHs) to see how we can adjust, improve or amend those to make it more attractive or amenable to the needs of the farmer. That is one of the proposals tabled in the eradication strategy.

Mr Hatch: To clarify, Chair, that is animals of all ages in the herd, not just calves.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): OK. Thank you.

Mr McGlone: Thanks very much to all the officials who are presenting. I want to go back to the implications of the spread of the disease by badgers. You have made some notional reference to research carried out on the issues in other jurisdictions and down South. Yes, badgers are one thing. I do not know whether you are aware — you probably are, as you are the Department — of the quite prolific growth in the deer population. As you will also be aware, deer can travel an awful lot further than badgers can. I am not sure of the prevalence in deer, but I know from wearing another hat, as Seamus will know, that deer can catch and spread TB. One farmer whom I know attributes the contamination of his herd directly to that. I have two questions. The first is specifically around what the Department feels the spread of the disease via badgers is, how that can be curtailed and what options for curtailment have been or are likely to be considered. Secondly, what is the level of knowledge and information, and what research has been done on the spread of TB via the wild deer population?

Mr Gartland: Thanks very much, Patsy. I will take the first question on potential badger intervention options and then ask Raymond or Michael to come in on deer and cattle. On wildlife intervention, Patsy, as you are aware, the TBSPG outlined that only a holistic approach addressing all the spreads of disease would work. The Department accepted that and said that it could see merit in what was proposed, which was for a proactive cull, subject to the views of the Minister. The Minister is on record

as saying that he agrees with the approach that all vectors need to be addressed. As a result, we have been looking to develop the final options for him on what wildlife intervention would look like and how we would take it forward. That involves looking at other jurisdictions. It involves looking at TVR and the experiences that we have learned from. A suite of options is under consideration in respect of the business case and advice that is being finalised. The Minister will then decide on a way forward. A lot of factors need to be taken into consideration, not least the consultation that we will have to do to get stakeholder views. There are also value-for-money perspectives and what the business case shows, and also non-monetary benefits. The Department is looking at a wide range of things. The Minister has already outlined that he intends to address it. That will, hopefully, be subject to his final views very shortly as we continue to progress it.

We absolutely recognise TB in deer. Raymond will come in on this in a second. We recognise it to such an extent that, in the strategy, one of the recommendations to us, on which we have been analysing final advice to the Minister, is to bring in additional legislation to give us the power to test those animals. At the moment, we can test animals only if cattle are on-site in the same holding. We are very much aware of that and researched it, as far as I am aware, when I was away from the role, but I will let Raymond or Michael comment on that point, Patsy.

Mr McGlone: May I intervene? The deer population has become so extensive in parts of Scotland that it is a major problem. Sorry for interrupting, but can you learn from the experience in Scotland with the wild deer population?

Mr Gartland: I will ask Michael or Raymond to come in here, but we look at our colleagues across the water and down South on all aspects of the TB programme and continually learn from their approach.

Mr Hatch: I am happy for Raymond to give details. Interestingly, Scotland has very low levels of bovine TB. Raymond, can you outline the situation with the deer?

Mr Kirke: I do not want to hog the meeting, but, unfortunately, this does look like one for me again. There are a number of points. Deer do, indeed, become infected with bovine TB, and there is evidence that they spread it to cattle. In fact, nearly all wild animal species become infected with TB. The issue is whether they are a dead-end host or whether they can spread it to domestic animals. As Neal mentioned, we intend to introduce legislation to allow testing, but, to clarify, that will be the testing of farm deer rather than wild deer.

Research was mentioned. We sponsor a number of research projects through the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) and others, and one of the projects that is under way is looking not only at the distribution of the various deer species in Northern Ireland but at the distribution of TB lesions in those deer species. I am not sure whether that is where the question is coming from, but there is quite a bit of concern among the farming community in the west of the Province about the role that deer may be playing. We are very aware of that, and that is one of the purposes of the project.

Down South, there has been a lot of interest in the deer problem, particularly in the Wicklow area. It has been grappling with an established cattle/deer issue for a number of years, and we are able to participate in seminars and forums that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) has set up to look at developments in that area.

We are very aware of the issue and accept that the animals become infected and can be a source of infection to cattle. At the moment, it is difficult to quantify the extent of that. Our epidemiological investigation of TB breakdowns in Northern Ireland is that perhaps 3% to 4% of all incidents are attributable to deer, so, while it is significant and concerning for the farmers involved, it may not be a major issue preventing eradication here.

Mr McGlone: May I come back on that? Farm deer make up a minuscule number of the overall deer population. One farmer whom I know approached someone whom he perceived to be the owner of a farm deer that had raked through his cabbage field, and he was told by the perceived owner, "This is a wild animal you have there". How do you discern that? As you will know much better than me, deer can travel wild distances and jumping a fence is not a problem to them, so what is the purpose of testing farm deer and the legislative remit that it gives you, as opposed to the ability to test other animals that are roaming freely? Indeed, they could be farm deer, as some of these are. They just jump the fence and head away and then, of course, become wild deer.

Mr Kirke: It may be useful to clarify that the legislation that we are talking about would give us the ability to test farm deer. It is not that we intend to introduce a routine testing programme for farm deer, but, on occasions, we have farms that are perhaps contiguous with a severe cattle breakdown and where there are only non-bovine species, and we are not able to do testing on those farms. It will be a useful power, but it will not be applied more widely. The feral deer issue is significant. As you rightly pointed out, it is very difficult to keep feral deer off your property.

Mr McGlone: I will take this a stage further. There are people out there, some of whom are employed by the Department, who work to maintain deer population levels. Some of those people are well skilled in the world of grafting and know what signs to watch out for. Is there any methodology by which you could work with some of the organisations and, indeed, your own people to ensure that, when an animal is killed, found dead or hit by a vehicle — maybe that animal has been killed and somebody has found evidence of TB on the tongue or lesions, maybe on the lungs or wherever else they might be — to ensure that that is reported back, because that would be a red flag for any other animals in the area and herds that farmers might have in proximity to that animal — relative proximity, I should say, given that it is a deer.

Mr Kirke: Absolutely. The material for the AFBI project to which I referred is provided entirely by the deer-hunting community. We are very grateful for its participation in that. There is also a legislative requirement for any lesions of suspected TB to be reported. That includes suspected TB in wild deer that are shot. Again, the hunting community is relatively coherent, and we have good contacts through its organisations. We appreciate its support.

Mr McGlone: OK. Thanks very much indeed, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): No problem. Maurice, you are back online. You had dipped out for a wee bit. Do you want to come in here?

Mr M Bradley: Can you hear me, Chair?

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Yes, Maurice, we can now.

Mr M Bradley: Chair, I want to pick up a point that Rosemary raised regarding the sale of calves. I believe that there are markets in England, and, recently, a pilot in Wales, that allow approved dedicated sales of TB-restricted cattle, under licence, of course, but not to other herds, directly to slaughter. Can you tell me whether that is the case?

Mr Gartland: I will take that, Maurice. Yes, that is the case. In Wales, they are referred to as "orange marts". However, it is a very different situation to ours. As we outlined, alternative control herds, whereby you would allow that move from a TB-restricted herd to a 100%-housed unit to protect your neighbour's herd and so forth, have not yet been taken up in Northern Ireland. One of the key proposals is for us to work with industry and for TBEP to engage on that to understand why that is and to see what the parameters could be to get more of those established.

In England, there are, I think, over 200 or 300 of them. In Wales, I think that there are nine or 10 on the pilot. Therefore, the mart provides that forum where those ACHs can proceed and the stock be sold through that mart. At the moment, in Northern Ireland, it would not make much sense because we do not have alternative control herds to sell into and where those cattle could go. That is the difference. We would and could consider that after getting ACHs in operation, depending on the outcome of that review as part of the strategy.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you very much for that. I just wondering. Perhaps, as you are looking into it, you could keep the Committee updated on any progress.

Mr Gartland: Absolutely, Maurice. We are not looking into the marts at the moment. We are looking at alternative control herds as a whole, which is where the cattle would go after following through the mart instead of going directly to slaughter. We would need to get the alternative control herds up and running in Northern Ireland if we were ever to have a mart. The mart would come after that. No work is being done on the mart. The first stage is to see whether alternative control herds could be established in Northern Ireland, or what industry feels could be the restrictions to that, taking into account disease spread as the primary concern for the Department. That is what we are doing. It will be part of the strategy that you will see.

Mr M Bradley: Thanks very much for that. Thank you, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): OK, Maurice.

Ms Bailey: Thanks for the briefing. Have you any more detail on the introduction of the compensation cap for farmers?

Mr Gartland: Thanks very much, Clare. As you are aware, TBSPG had recommended a cap of £1,500 and, then, £1,800 for pedigree cattle. From that, we developed proposals and put out a consultation saying that we were minded to progress down that route along with a number of other compensation measures. However, that was predicated on the fact that a Minister would need to take a decision on it. Since that point, we have been developing final proposals for the Minister to look at and approve. That will be subject to his approval with regard to how he wants to take that forward.

We are cognisant of the fact that Northern Ireland is the only part of these islands, both the UK and Ireland, that does not have any compensation cap or regime in place. There is a £5,000 cap in Scotland and Wales. Scotland gives a bit more for pedigrees. In England, it goes by table valuations. We are the only part of the UK that, technically, has unlimited 100% value compensation. That criticism was made by the Northern Ireland Audit Office report, the European Commission and the Public Accounts Committee in 2009.

Those proposals are being looked at, and it is for the Minister to take the final decision. With that, secondary legislation will be required, so that will be consulted on. I am sure that we will be engaged on that, as will all our stakeholders.

Ms Bailey: Thank you. You mentioned the Northern Ireland Audit Office report, which, in 2018, identified that we were not doing very well. All our measures and previous efforts have resulted in a failure to reduce disease levels. I wonder where we go from there. There is the TB strategic partnership group, and there are a lot of recent studies. I was looking at one in particular that showed that badger culls risk an increase in the spread of the disease. Once you start culling badgers, they will start moving further afield and, therefore, spread the virus. That links in to what Patsy said about deer; they roam far and wide. We could put it in the context of COVID and how we deal with that. To control that, we are trying to get people to stay still and stay at home, rather than move about and spread the virus.

You mentioned that you had consulted widely with environmental stakeholders and the wildlife sector. There is a lot of science out there and it can be a wee bit dubious in places. Are you confident that the appropriate science is being relied on?

Mr Gartland: Clare, there are a couple of points there. I will address the first one or two, and then bring in Raymond or Michael. I think that what you refer to is the "perturbation" issue. We have a number of views on that, and some results have come from the TVR project. Michael and Raymond are better placed to discuss that with you.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office report indicated that we were not doing terribly well, but we should note that one of the report's key recommendations was to implement the TBSPG recommendations in full. It said that a key aspect is that a holistic approach has not been taken in Northern Ireland. We are not addressing all the factors, which include wildlife intervention, compensation and the testing regime. Off the back of that, in 2018, when we consulted on the proposed way forward — that was the time when we had the engagement of all the other stakeholders, including environmental NGOs — we indicated that we intended to move forward, possibly with all the aspects and addressing them all, subject to the Minister's views on compensation and wildlife intervention, which we are now considering and doing.

Wildlife intervention and the potential for badgers to spread out is the perturbation issue. Raymond or Michael, do either you want to come in on that issue?

Mr Kirke: Yes, Neal. What has been referred to is the perturbation of badgers, once you start removing badgers from the population. For instance, if you remove a dominant female from a clan, that affects the behaviour of the rest of the clan. Perturbation and, in turn, a perturbation effect — that is, an effect on cattle TB incidence in the area — was observed in GB. It has not been reported from ROI, and one of the specific findings from our TVR project was that there was no sign of it there either.

We do not know why there would be a difference, but there certainly is a difference between the behaviour of badgers in GB and those in the island of Ireland. Generally speaking, the size of the social group, sometimes referred to as clan size, of GB badgers is considerably bigger than that observed here. It may have something to do with that, but perturbation has not been observed here, and we do not believe that it is an issue.

Ms Bailey: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Before we finish up, I want to get an indication from you about the timeline. The strategic outline case was approved in 2017 between you and the Department of Finance. DAERA is working with veterinary officials on the outline business case, which will then have to go for final business case approval by the Department of Finance. What is the timeline for getting that outline business case completed and getting it to the Department of Finance to move on to the next stage?

Mr Gartland: We hope that that will happen very shortly — in the next number of months. The Minister is very firm on this and wants it moved on as soon as possible. That is what we aim to do. The business case is very complicated and difficult. It is over 30 years in the making and is one of the most technically complicated that many of us have seen in quite a long time. That is partly why it has been delayed, to be frank. We are moving at pace and, following completion of that business case development, we will be able to give the Minister final options for a way forward, and then launch the consultation. Certainly, completion will be within the next number of months. I do not want to give a strict timescale in case outside factors prevent that from happening. It is the main priority for us and the team, the division and the Minister. We are working on it very much at pace.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): You are working on the outline business case, and, within the next number of months, it will move to a public consultation.

Mr Gartland: Should the Minister decide on his preferred way forward and those requirements decide that we need a public consultation. Again, that is subject to his final views.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Finally, finally, the issue of divergence was raised during the last briefing. I note that some progress has been made on the cattle vaccine. What implications will that have for here if the cattle vaccine is approved across the water in Britain but is not approved in the EU?

Mr Gartland: That is an issue of divergence, Chair. As you are aware, under the Northern Ireland protocol, we require to align ourselves with a number of pieces of legislation, not least on animal health and welfare. The animal health law that will come into effect in April will form the basis for a lot of our statutorily obliged programme measures. Should GB diverge and use the vaccine, that is a decision for it to take. Obviously, it will have to take into account the trade implications of that, and it will need to look at that further. There are the common frameworks. As I discussed with you in November, those have been set up to manage that divergence and to discuss the implications for Northern Ireland and GB, should that be an issue. We will have to continue to adhere to the programme requirements under EU legislation. Therefore, at the moment, it is not a possibility for us, but, in time, who knows? It depends on the legislative picture in the coming years.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I will not ask you to try to foresee or forecast any trade implications because I am sure that that would be very difficult and challenging at this time. Is that right, or can you foresee any difficulties?

Mr Gartland: For Northern Ireland, I cannot say. As long as we adhere to programme measures, and it depends on what third countries dealing with GB would want regarding a cattle vaccine. I cannot comment on that. My primary concern is the Northern Ireland programme and making sure that our industry is protected, our trade is protected and that we are adhering to the legislation as outlined and required under EU regulations and the soon-to-be animal health law to protect that.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Raymond, Seamus, Neal and Michael, I thank you very much for your detailed briefing and for answering all questions. Hopefully, we will see you in the next number of months or weeks.

Mr Gartland: Thanks very much, Chair. Thank you, members.